

Keeping the sea lanes free



An Iranian-flagged vessel in distress in the Gulf of Aden.

For many, filling up with a tank of fuel at your local petrol station would have no connection to the Royal Australian Navy. Right?

Yet a good percentage of the things you buy at the supermarket or the petrol station had to travel through that narrow sliver of water between north-east Africa and south-west Asia – and all that shipping traffic has been provided safe passage by the armed forces of Combined Task Force 150, which includes Royal Australian Navy personnel and assets.

ANZAC-class frigate HMAS Parramatta, currently on her fourth rotation to the Middle East Area of Operations as part of Operation Slipper, is the 27th Royal Australian Navy ship to deploy since 2001.

HMAS Parramatta, captained by Commander Guy Blackburn, is deployed to the MEAO as part of the Australian

contribution to the Combined Maritime Forces, working under various United Nations Security Council Resolutions, to provide maritime security and counter-terrorism support in the Gulf and Horn of Africa region and as part of the international commitment to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

And, as usual, Parramatta has conducted numerous operations since her arrival in the area.

Commander Blackburn described the importance of the Aussies' mission to Australian households.

"Simply put, [our mission] means we are up in the Middle East keeping the 'sea lanes, free lanes'. We're making sure that all the mariners and the trade of the world can get through safely, so that everybody at home can get all their goods," Commander Blackburn said.

"The deployment so far has been very rewarding. Everybody enjoys doing active service.

"This is what we train for and it's the pinnacle of our careers to be able to be up here, doing our job at sea."

Leading Seaman Dwayne Cocks, an aircraft controller, also described this deployment as a career highlight.

"The most rewarding part to me is controlling foreign military aircraft and coalition aircraft around the sky. Under the direction of the operations officer, we all work together to achieve a specific aim," Leading Seaman Cocks said.

The 191-strong crew celebrated Christmas in the Gulf of Aden, where spirits were high after receiving Christmas gifts and well wishes from loved ones in Australia. However celebrations were brief as, even during the holiday period,

operations did not cease and the crew remained vigilant to their task.

In fact, on Christmas Eve, Parramatta received a call from a vessel in distress 400 nautical miles off the eastern coast of Yemen and immediately increased speed to assist.

Over the next 24 hours, Parramatta monitored the situation as she made best speed to the stricken vessel.

Commander Blackburn said, when they arrived on the scene, the Iranian-registered vessel's crew had an orange flag flying at the front of the vessel – a recognised international signal of distress.

"The vessel's master waved at us and asked us to come onboard to help them.

"It is a time honoured mariner's tradition to help those in need on the sea," Commander Blackburn said.

Parramatta transferred more than 700 litres of fuel, as well as water and food to the vessel and its crew, making it safe to proceed to the nearest port, which, thanks to Parramatta, it was able to do under its own power.

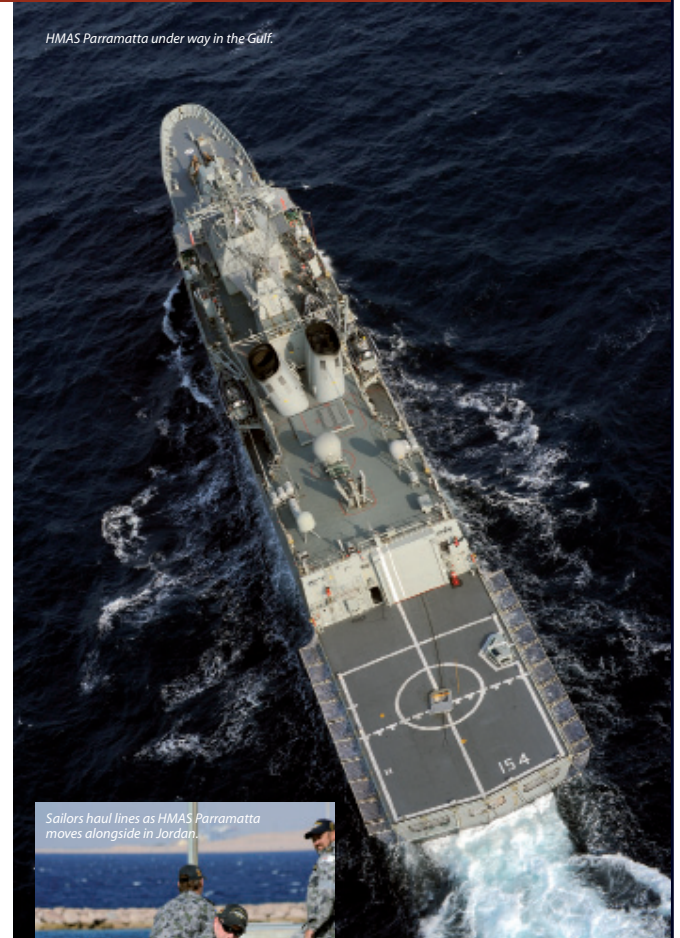
On counter-piracy patrols, HMAS Parramatta has also seen action.

Commander Blackburn said that throughout its first counter-piracy patrol HMAS Parramatta conducted a number of vessel queries, approach-and-assist visits and flag-verification boardings.

HMAS Parramatta will hand over to HMAS Melbourne this month, before returning home to Sydney for a much-deserved break.

By the time she returns to Australia, Parramatta is expected to have covered 60,000km or more.

HMAS Parramatta under way in the Gulf.



Sailors haul lines as HMAS Parramatta moves alongside in Jordan.



A RHIB pulls away from the ship during operations in the Red Sea.



Sub Lieutenant Russell Stevens conducts a manual navigation check.



HMAS Parramatta's boarding team conduct approach-and-assist visits to Dhows in the Gulf of Aden.



HMAS Parramatta's bridge staff at work.